

Blue Ribbon Commission on Higher Education
Report to the Mayor of Hartford, Eddie A. Pérez

June 25, 2004



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Executive Summary

The Hartford Blue Ribbon Commission on Higher Education was appointed by Mayor Eddie Pérez and charged to produce recommendations towards the Mayor's stated goals of increasing by 25% the number of Hartford students who go on to higher education, increasing the graduation rate of Hartford residents attending four-year colleges, and attracting more of these graduates from four-year programs to live and work in Hartford.

The Commission carried out its assignment by reviewing research-based literature and background information from the district, followed by general and group conversations on the identified areas. The three Critical Areas for Strategic Intervention were defined as follows: 1) Curriculum, 2) Experiential Learning and Advising, and 3) College Admission and Completion.

For each of the Critical Areas, the Commission agreed that the recommendations should come in the form of objectives, measurable outcomes and recommended actions. Available baseline data and research regarding best practices were used in framing the recommendations in this report. The Commission defines the following objectives by Critical Area:

Curriculum

1.A Ensure that all students experience a PK through Grade 8 curriculum that prepares them to succeed in college preparatory courses during their high school years. 1.B Provide all students who have fallen behind academically with accelerated learning opportunities when they enter high school. 1.C Identify, and revise as appropriate, the content area standards and assessments that constitute a college preparatory curriculum. 1.D Provide the conditions in the high schools that make it possible for all students to experience a college preparatory curriculum.

Experiential, Learning and Advising

2.A Provide diverse social, academic and career-related experiences through challenging interactions beyond the schools. 2.B Provide comprehensive counseling focusing on the expectations that all students are going to college, peer tutoring, support and mentoring that includes the exploration of college life.

College Admission and Completion

3.A Ensure articulation between high school learning and college expectations, including opportunities to demonstrate learning using college placement tests and providing for timely application of high school students to college admission. 3.B Provide pathways and support for Hartford schools graduates to complete a college degree and return to Hartford for employment in their chosen field.

Finally, enlist the support of the private schools to share best practices and resources, and to provide Hartford students the opportunity to access a college prep curriculum through the private schools system.

To achieve the Mayor's goals, the Commission recommends the establishment of an implementation committee, the annual collection and review of key data defined in the measurable outcomes and the proper allocation of resources.

The Commission believes that the students represent the future of Hartford. Their academic success is essential in meeting the goals for economic development proposed in local and regional development partnerships, such as the Knowledge Corridor. The health and wealth of the city is directly connected to the educational attainment of its citizens.

Background

In January 2004, the Mayor of the City of Hartford, Eddie Pérez, convened a Blue Ribbon Commission and charged it with the following goals: **By the year 2009 increase by 25% the number of Hartford students who go on to higher education, increase the graduation rate of Hartford residents attending four-year colleges, and attract more of these graduates from four-year programs to live and work in Hartford.**

The Mayor appointed to the Commission representatives from the different sectors, including business, philanthropy, public and private higher education, and public and private secondary education, a parent and a student of the Hartford Public School system. As co-chairs, the Mayor appointed Superintendent of Hartford Public Schools, Robert Henry and Vice Chancellor of Academic Affairs of the Connecticut State University System, Estela López. In addition, a number of staff served as liaisons and provided critical support to the work of the Commission.

Methodology

The Commission agreed to carry out its assignment by using research-based information to determine the most relevant factors that will enable Hartford graduates to enroll and succeed in college. The Commission also agreed to collect and analyze reliable data that fully describe the status of Hartford regarding identified key factors. The task of establishing baseline data proved difficult since much of the data is based on self-reported intent to go to college and there is not a comprehensive resource to ascertain the actual number of students who enroll in a four-year university. Using self-reported data, the percentage of high school students intending to go to college at any level ranged from 67% to 77%, with 25 % to 46% of them intending to attend a four-year institution. According to a report issued by the National Student Clearinghouse, of the 790 graduates in the four Hartford public high schools, 390 could be found in their membership database of 2700 colleges and universities. Of these 390 graduates, 59% (230) were attending two-year institutions and 41% (160) were attending four-year institutions of higher education. Although the Clearinghouse database does not include all institutions of higher education, these data is expected to be a much more accurate reflection of real college-going rates.

The members of the Blue Ribbon Commission reviewed background information and literature related to its charge. Facilitated large and small group discussion sessions were held over the course of three months. The Commission also participated in a videoconference with Kati Haycock, President of the Education Trust and a national expert on school reform. Ms. Haycock shared with the Commission the Education Trust's critical findings related to increasing the college-rate participation and other nation-wide data related to student success.

The Commission invited Hartford students, both current high school students and college-enrolled students, to share what they believed had enabled them to succeed.

The Commission decided to offer its recommendation as objectives, recommended actions and measurable outcomes. These objectives, actions and measurable outcomes will provide a

frame to guide the work of Hartford's schools toward reaching appropriate representation in higher education as well as establish the vehicle to monitor their evolution over time.

Finally, The Commission underscores the importance of implementation. The recommendations in this report provide key points that should drive the creation and execution of action plans towards accomplishing the goals. The implementation of such action plans need to be followed and appropriately monitored.

Critical Areas

Based on the Commission's research and the current status of Hartford schools, the Commission defined three major **Critical Areas for Strategic Intervention**:

- ❖ Curriculum
- ❖ Experiential Learning and Advising
- ❖ College Admission and Completion

FIRST CRITICAL AREA: CURRICULUM

What Works?

Research demonstrates that of all factors influencing admission and success in higher education, the highest impact by far comes from the student's exposure to a rigorous, academic college preparatory high school curriculum. A **college preparatory curriculum** yields a higher benefit for low-income, first-generation and minority students than for any other student population. Students who take a college preparatory curriculum (even in cases where their grades are lower) have higher rates of success once they enter college than students who take lower level courses. **Student effort and high expectations play a fundamental role in the outcomes for students during their high school years.**

Research indicates that for students who are workplace-bound, a college preparatory curriculum provides the best preparation to succeed. The benefits extend over a lifetime; today's workers need to adapt to multiple workplace retraining requirements as well as other educational professional development activities that help them not only adapt but also be successful in today's complex and competitive world.

Taking a college preparatory curriculum should be the expectation for every Hartford high school student, regardless of her/his short or long-term goals.

The college preparatory curriculum consists of:

- 1) English (four units) – courses should emphasize writing skills, literature and reading comprehension.
- 2) Mathematics (four units) – courses should include Algebra I (Basic or Elementary), Geometry and Algebra II (Intermediate). A fourth unit in trigonometry, analytical geometry or pre-calculus is recommended for students planning to take Calculus in college.
- 3) Science (two units) – courses should include one unit of a laboratory science.
- 4) Social Sciences (two units) – courses should include one unit of United States History.
- 5) Foreign Language (two units) – courses in the same language are recommended.

GETTING READY: LAYING THE FOUNDATIONS IN THE EARLIER GRADES

Objective 1.A

Ensure that all students experience a PK through Grade 8 curriculum that prepares them to succeed in college preparatory courses during high school .

Students should become immersed in rich and engaging learning opportunities with the appropriate depth and rigor starting in the earliest years of their education. A coordinated and articulated progression of learning leading to the college preparatory curriculum should guide teaching and learning in elementary and middle schools.

Recommended Actions¹

Develop a continuous curriculum revision process in grades PK-8 that is guided by expectations for a college preparatory curriculum in the high school years. The superintendent should champion this curriculum revision with the support of all Hartford schools constituencies.

Measurable Outcome

PK-8 curriculum revision to start with Grade 8 in year one and to continually add an additional lower grade during each year of this initiative's implementation.

Objective 1.B

Provide all students who have fallen behind academically with accelerated learning opportunities upon entering high school.

Grade 9 students who are entering high school below grade level need to be provided with accelerated and intellectually engaging opportunities to learn the basic skills and acquire the knowledge that will be needed to be successful with a college preparatory curriculum. Students in need of accelerated learning should be identified as soon as possible, preferably in anticipation to entering Grade 9, using standards and assessments adopted by the Hartford schools and other available information, such as the CMT test results. Back-filling remediation and enrichment approaches that recognize the students' high level of intellectual development (in spite of their academic shortcomings) should be adopted in every Hartford high school.

Recommended Actions

Review and revise current accelerated learning activities, with particular attention to summer activities in anticipation to entering the 9th grade, for students lacking the skills and competencies to be successful with a high school college prep curriculum.

Starting in the Summer of 2005, mandate intellectually-engaging and accelerated learning opportunities for all 9th graders coming into high school without the skills and competencies to be successful with a high school college prep curriculum.

Establish a reliable and comprehensive information system regarding the number of students meeting standards and performing at grade level.

Measurable Outcomes

All students entering high school below grade level receive intellectually-engaging and accelerated learning opportunities that provide the basic skills and knowledge needed to succeed with a college preparatory curriculum.

¹ The Recommended Actions in this report are not intended as the comprehensive set of actions that will result in accomplishing the stated objective. They are however key points that The Commission finds essential in working towards the objective.

TACKLING THE CORE: IMPLEMENTING THE COLLEGE PREPARATORY CURRICULUM

The Commission recognizes the multiple factors that must be addressed to identify and implement a college preparatory curriculum for all students. Issues of curriculum planning and design, instructional approaches, learning, and assessment methods must be addressed and appropriately aligned to college expectations. Feedback from student assessment data should be used to drive the changes needed for the continuous academic improvement of all students. The Commission places the highest confidence in the expertise of the educators in the Hartford Public Schools and the collaborations that they and their higher education counterparts will be able to frame.

Objective 1.C

Identify, and revise as appropriate, the content area standards and assessments that constitute a college preparatory curriculum.

Current high school course offerings should be revised to align with the standards for a well-defined sequence of college preparatory courses. All students should experience a continuity of learning that incorporates content, instructional approaches and assessments leading to the production of college level work throughout school. All courses should be reviewed, revised and/or redesigned as needed to meet these high expectations.

Recommended Actions

In partnership with the college sector, specify the course content, coursework and assessment of learning for a college prep curriculum with particular emphasis in mathematics, reading and writing.

Use these outcomes to guide the revision of high school graduation requirements.

Consider the possibility of establishing a College-Prep High School Diploma.

Measurable Outcomes

Adopt a sequence of courses with content, instructional methodologies and assessments that meet the standards of a college preparatory curriculum.

Objective 1.D

Provide the conditions in the high schools that make it possible for all students to experience a college preparatory curriculum.

The superior pedagogical expertise, knowledge and field experience of Hartford educators should be garnered to support a college preparatory curriculum. Educators in the Hartford schools must use their collective expertise and, with contributions from faculty in the higher education institutions, offer high school instruction to all students that reflects college expectations. Creating collegial links between high school teachers and higher education faculty should be a priority.

Students should be challenged by the higher expectations of the college preparatory curriculum in an environment that progressively reflects college-like learning. School

resources, including the use of time, should be allocated to maximize this improved learning environment.

Recommended Actions

Collaborate with higher education to design and provide professional development opportunities for all teachers in core academic subjects. Such opportunities should allow teachers to incorporate college-like instructional strategies, styles and assessment so that high school students are exposed to a continuum of college-like learning experiences leading to graduation and enhancing transition to college.

Create a Goal Setting Checklist for every Hartford high school student starting in her/his freshman year. This list should include courses needed to get to college and progress made toward this goal as the student progresses through high school. Periodic reviews should be conducted together with any necessary follow up with the high school counselor.

Increase the instructional time available to students during the academic year for core curricular work. Investigate block scheduling and calendar adjustments to improve the use of time spent in learning core academic core subjects

Create high school courses for college credit in collaboration with higher education institutions. Share staff for course planning and co-teaching (high school/college faculty).

Imbed components that promote a preparation for college in existing programs, such as the Learning Communities initiative.

Measurable Outcomes

Doubled percent of Hartford students who graduate with a completed college preparatory course sequence at the end of five years.

Emphasized rigorous Math and science courses based on student course enrollment patterns, use of time, and other indicators.

Doubled percent of students successfully completing Algebra II at the academic level at the end of five years.

Increased percent of Hartford students taking HS courses for college credit.

Increased percent of students successfully completing AP courses with special emphasis in mathematics and English.

SECOND CRITICAL AREA: EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING AND ADVISING

What Works?

High expectations and a broad range of experiences that place students in diverse and challenging environments are necessary conditions for developing a stance that will lead to college success. Over their high school years, Hartford students should develop confidence in their own potential, be enriched by a diversity of social and career-related situations, develop habits of independent study, and acquire the necessary problem solving and critical thinking skills for success in college.

Teachers' expectations should be for all students to go to college. At the end of their high school preparation, students should be ready for college learning.

An introduction to college life is particularly important for first generation students. Equally important is a clear introduction to the intricacies of financing a college education. Parental involvement should include awareness about available options to finance college. Grant and scholarship opportunities, as opposed to loans, should be emphasized; national research indicates that a major factor in the students' inability to return to college when they temporarily interrupt studies is the need to work in order to pay incurred debt from previous loans.

Students and parents need access to school counselors and to college admissions and financial aid officers, the two systems need to be further linked to benefit parents and student alike.

EXPANDING THE HORIZONS AND RAISING EXPECTATIONS: MINDSET AND SUPPORT FOR COLLEGE IN ALL GRADES

Objective 2.A

Provide diverse social, academic and career-related experiences through challenging interactions beyond the schools.

To succeed in college, students must develop the confidence and capacity to adjust and compete in diverse social, academic and career-related settings. Hartford students need exposure to these diverse settings, including regular interactions with individuals from different socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds.

Recommended Actions

Establish additional stronger private partnerships, internships, service learning, and magnet school related projects to expose students to diverse social, academic and career-related experiences. Corporative contributions and involvement should be increased.

Identify and adopt in a more systemic manner across the schools the best practices that are already in place, with particular emphasis on activities directed to 9th graders. For example,

identify mentoring partners that will follow the student from freshman year through graduation.

Enlist support of Foundation for Excellent Schools to increase the number of partnerships from four schools in 2003-04 to ten schools in 2004-05.

Ensure that all students are exposed to hands-on learning opportunities during their high school career, including “job shadowing” in Hartford-based companies.

Measurable Outcomes

Increased number of students participating in mentoring, peer advising, tutoring and other support aimed at college admission and success, with emphasis on Math and science tutoring activities.

Increased partnerships, internships, and service-learning opportunities available to students.

Increased number of students involved in work-study activities – paid and not paid.

Objective 2.B

Provide comprehensive counseling focusing on the expectation that all students are going to college with peer tutoring, support and mentoring that includes the exploration of college life.

Recommended Actions

Infuse the expectations that all students are going to college early in the PK–12 continuum.

Provide an annual early college awareness blitz for all students (e.g. May 6 Blitz)

Require college awareness activities throughout K-12.

Require that parents (and, when appropriate, teachers) meet mentors, counselors and financial aid advisors to benefit from more collaborative interactions.

Consolidate existing counseling functions into College Prep Counseling Centers that provide a clear academic emphasis for students with the expectation to go to college, and in particular to four-year institutions.

Enhance the college orientation information process in collaboration with colleges and universities.

Measurable Outcomes

Counseling systems across all school grades focused on high expectations for college admission and completion.

Increased number and intensity of tutoring and mentoring experiences with a college focus.

THIRD CRITICAL AREA: COLLEGE ADMISSION AND COMPLETION

What Works?

The Commission recognizes that the various components of educational systems must be coordinated to support the successful transition of high school students to four-year higher education institutions. Curriculum, assessment and testing, guidance and counseling, college admission processes, developmental services, support mechanisms for socialization and adaptation to college life need to be addressed comprehensively.

Accommodating the realities of student mobility and the need to serve critical areas of workforce shortages statewide require stronger articulation among the higher education institutions in the state.

Hartford area businesses will receive direct and indirect benefits by having Hartford school graduates return to the city after college for employment. Consequently, there are strong reasons for investing in their academic success in college and their return for employment in their chosen fields.

ACHIEVING SUCCESS AT THE BOUNDARIES: ALIGNING LEARNING, TESTING AND THE TRANSITION TO COLLEGE

Objective 3.A

Ensure articulation between high school learning and college expectations, including opportunities to demonstrate learning using college placement tests and providing for timely application of high school students to college admission.

The college preparatory curriculum in the Curriculum section of this report needs to ensure the alignment with college expectations. Align assessment and testing systems between the high schools and the colleges.

Recommended Actions

Align all course objectives in the basic skills areas so that the content and pedagogy, particularly in mathematics and English courses, correspond across the educational systems (high schools - community colleges - four year universities).

Align high school graduation requirements with college admission criteria.

Provide high school students with opportunities to prepare for the PSAT and SAT exams, and provide students with guidance about when the tests should be taken.

Offer college placements tests in mathematics and English in the Hartford high schools.

Measurable Outcomes

Increased from 65% to 75% the percent of graduates taking the SAT.

Doubled by the end of 5 years the percent of high school graduates achieving a 1000 average SAT score.

Increased by 25 % the percent of Hartford students admitted to a four-year college.

Increased by 25% the percent of timely applications for admission and financial aid.

HARVESTING THE BENEFITS: GRADUATING FROM COLLEGE AND JOINING THE WORKFORCE

Objective 3.B

Provide pathways and support for Hartford schools graduates to complete a college degree and return to Hartford for employment in their chosen field.

The retention and timely graduation of students admitted to college relies on the appropriate mechanisms to identify and address any shortcomings in the students' preparation for college. These mechanisms include addressing any developmental needs early in college, providing supplemental instruction, and other forms of induction and services to adjust to college life. Connecticut colleges and universities should make a strong commitment to provide appropriate learning and support services that align with the needs of the Hartford school graduate population.

A fully prepared student entering college has a wider range of fields of concentration from which to choose, many of which have been identified as workforce shortage areas by employers in the Hartford region.

Recommended Actions

Create/strengthen comprehensive transfer and articulation agreements between community college and four-year universities, including provisions for joint academic advising of students.

Implement strategies at the college level, including social and academic factors, to increase student persistence.

Provide financial aid counseling to high school seniors (by Hartford schools) and enrolled college students (by college and universities where students enroll) so they can acquire financial literacy, avoid unnecessary debt, and make better use of the financial resources available to them and their families.

Provide skill set development activities to college students from Hartford, e.g. team building, through summer internships and similar opportunities supported by the business sector.

Create programs supported by the Hartford business sector, such as loan forgiveness, housing stipends and other economic incentives, to bring graduates back to Hartford.

Create, during the implementation phase, a working group from the business sector to identify incentives, best practices and delineate next steps to attract college graduates back to Hartford.

Measurable Outcomes

Increased by 25 % by the end of 5 years the percent of Hartford students who graduate from a four-year college.

Increased by 25 % the percent of Hartford students who transfer from Manchester Community College, Capital Community College, and other identified two-year colleges to a four-year college in the state.

Increased percent of college graduates from Hartford schools returning to the city for employment.

PRIVATE SCHOOLS INITIATIVE

Rationale

Given the goal of the Blue Ribbon Commission, which is to increase the percentage of Hartford students attending four-year colleges by 25% by 2009, the area private schools can play an important role. All students in these schools participate in a college preparatory curriculum and have access to significant college counseling support. These schools place 99% of their students at four-year colleges. Through this initiative, the private school sector would benefit by establishing closer links with Hartford and increasing the diversity of their student population. The private schools should therefore play a significant role in contributing to the achievement of this ambitious goal.

The following private schools have stated interest in participating:

Suffield Academy
Westminster School
Northwest Catholic High School
Mercy High School
Xavier High School
The Ethel Walkers School
Kingswood-Oxford School
Miss Porters School
Avon Old Farms School
The Master's School
Watkinson School
The Loomis Chaffee School
Saint Paul Catholic High School
East Catholic High School

INCORPORATING THE BENEFITS OF THE PRIVATE SCHOOLS

Objective 4

Increase the number of Hartford students at area private schools.

Recommended Actions

- 1) Raise awareness of seventh graders in Hartford public schools about area private schools by sponsoring an annual school fair in the Spring. Our research and surveys indicate that the area private schools would eagerly attend.
- 2) Seek resources to help Hartford students prepare for the secondary school admissions process by building a model similar to Prep for Prep. This would cover early recruitment, identifying qualified students, guidance on standardized testing,

interviewing, application support and financial aid guidance. Also, ensure that students meet admission and financial aid deadlines. This support would help increase the number of Hartford students that are prepared to succeed in the private school admission and financial aid processes.

- 3) The private schools are committed to supporting the Mayor's goals and they will seek external and internal funding opportunities to sustain this initiative.
- 4) Partner with the public school system to share best practices in college counseling and in implementing a college prep curriculum.
- 5) Provide a significant number of places (number to be determined later) in summer programs to Hartford students.
- 6) Each private school will set its own individual goals regarding the target increase in the number of Hartford students.

Measurable Outcomes

In the 2003-2004 academic year, there were approximately 175 Hartford students enrolled at area private schools in grades 9-12.

Given the fact that 99% of these students will attend four-year college, the measurable outcomes related to this area are very straightforward. In short, our goal should be to increase the number of Hartford students attending private schools by at least 25% by 2009.

This would call for an increase of at least 11 students per year over the next four years (44 total) which would bring the number of Hartford students enrolled at independent schools to 219 by 2009.

Increase the number of private schools in Connecticut participating in this effort.

Conclusion

The Commission recognizes that accomplishing the overarching goals require the concerted and sustained efforts of all constituencies in the Hartford Public School System and its partners. Internal cohesiveness and committed collaboration of external partners are necessary to implement these improvements and achieve the systemic transformation underlying the Mayor's goal. The business community and the higher education system in the state are critical partners in achieving the goals.

In order to increase the college-going rate in Hartford, the Blue Ribbon Commission recommends the **establishment of an implementation committee** charged with defining the specific action steps that correspond to the above objectives. Guiding and follow up on each part of the implementation requires **the establishment of a more comprehensive and joint information-sharing system incorporating relevant data** from the Hartford schools, higher education institutions and the private sector. This information system should be used by the implementation committee to further quantify the measurable outcomes, as well as to guide and monitor the implementation of all recommendations in this report. The collection and review of key data measuring progress toward the goals and objectives should be used to produce an **annual report to The Commission**.

Everyone in Hartford must have high expectations to support and promote the belief that all of our students can learn and achieve at the college level. Students represent the future of Hartford. If they fail, Hartford will fail in spite of new buildings, renovations and other efforts to revitalize the city. The health and wealth of this city is directly connected to the educational attainment of its citizens.

The Blue Ribbon Commission recommends the following implementation strategies:

- **Focus on 9th graders beginning in Fall 2005.** This is the graduating class of 2009 and therefore is the class that should increase their college-going rate by 25 %. In September 2005, students who are behind when they enter 9th grade should be afforded accelerated learning opportunities that will get them to grade level as soon as possible. Such opportunities should also be provided to students in higher grades to allow them to benefit from the academic transformation of the schools.
- **Analyze and determine resources needed** to implement the recommended actions. Leveraging external funding, as possible, will be important to the implementation of the recommended actions. Consolidating and expanding current partnerships with higher education and the business and industry sectors will be critical in securing these forms of external funding. In times of fiscal constraints, the support for the strategic actions with the highest impact becomes more crucial than ever.
- Commit to **continuous collaboration** between Hartford Public Schools and all the stakeholders, i.e., higher education, the business sector, community organizations, city lawmakers, and state legislators.

Finally, the Commission emphasizes the need for the **collective will** of the entire Hartford Community to fulfill not only the Mayor's dream, but that of every child for the future.

Hartford should be known for its growing minds and the community support that has been built around them.